

An Alternative to Church

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An Alternative to Church

Introductory Comments

If one has been a lifelong churchgoer, and imagines asking a fellow churchgoer why that person attends church, one might expect to get the following general (non-) response:

"I'm here because,

"I'm here because,

"I'm here because

"I'm here,"¹

That is, for most churchgoers, their churchgoing seems to be more a matter of habit than the result of purposeful decision-making. Given this, further imaginary probing might elicit responses such as the following:

- "Going to church 'religiously' will earn me 'points;' and if I earn enough points, I will not be spending eternity in an excessively warm place."
- "The pastor has a wonderful personality, and tells amusing stories; I really like him!"
- "The pastor's sermons have good intellectual content: they are provocative, well-organized, and even well-delivered. I'd much rather listen to him than to Wolf Blitzer!"
- "The building in which services are held is awe-inspiring; I need to get away from the ugliness around me by regularly attending services at _____ church. Besides, there is no admission charge!"
- "I'm single, and looking for a chick to date, and perhaps eventually marry. As I'm not much of a drinker, I lack an opportunity to meet girls in bars—and would be suspicious of the morals of the girls that I would meet there anyway. If I weren't so cheap, I'd use an internet dating service, but I *am* cheap, and church gives me an inexpensive opportunity to meet the sort of person I think I'd like to have as a wife."
- "I haven't had a chance to play my clarinet since high school days, but because the church has a small orchestra, it has given me an opportunity to get back in the swing of things with my clarinet. Besides, it's fun to be with the others in that group."

¹To paraphrase Thorstein Veblen, *An Inquiry Into the Nature of Peace and the Terms of its Perpetuation*. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919, p. 60. First published by The Macmillan Company in 1917.

- “The church’s choir gives me a chance to sing solos. I love to perform, because it makes me feel important: And I absolutely love it when after the service someone compliments me on how beautiful my voice is.”
- “At my place of employment I’m just another grunt, but the church I attend has all sorts of committees, and I’m the chairman of one of them. Being the ‘boss’ for a change makes me feel like I’m a human after all, not just a cog in a big machine.”
- “I’m in such a habit of going to church (from my days as a child), that I just don’t feel right if I skip going to church on Sundays.”
- “Going to church gives me a chance to get away from my ‘job’ as a homemaker, and socialize a little.”
- “Given that I’m an alderman in the local government, it’s important that I be seen going to church. Thus, before and after services I try to shake hands and say ‘Hello’ to as many people as I can. That should help me get elected next time around!”
- “I’m from a large family, and most members of the family live here locally. Everyone in the family goes to church, and I would stand out like a ‘sore thumb’ if I didn’t follow suit. In fact, the others would start ‘hounding’ me if I didn’t attend church regularly. And if I stopped going entirely? Well, they would disown me, that’s for sure!”
- “I like to go to church and get involved with church activities because that’s a way of making important contacts. For example, if I can make friends with a plumber who goes to my church, perhaps he won’t ‘screw’ me if I call upon him for his services.”

It is perhaps somewhat cynical of me to offer such a list, but what a list such as this can do for us is to cause us to “rethink church”—to even, for that matter, ask: Should we *abandon* the churches in favor of some alternative; and if so, what might that alternative be?

In addressing that question, the logical starting point is to ask—in the case of “Christianity”—what that religion should be “about;” and the “aboutness” of Christianity can be expressed in either/or terms, using the words “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxy.” This is not to say that every “Christian” falls neatly into one of these two categories—for such is certainly not the case. Still, this distinction is a highly important one with Christianity.

The *former* word (*orthodoxy*) refers to a concept of Christianity that holds that what makes a person a “Christian” is that s/he accepts² certain *factual claims* as “true”: “facts” such as:

- God is real, not just a human invention.
- Jesus was born of a virgin.

² *Actually* accepts, not just *claims* to.

- Jesus was (and is) the (one and only) Son of God.
- Jesus died (on a cross) a sacrificial death; that is, a *causal* explanation of Jesus's death would be out of place, for Jesus purposely *chose* to die—"for our sins."
- Several days after His death, Jesus came back to life (i.e., was "resurrected").
- Several days after His resurrection, He ascended to Heaven—to be with His Father (i.e., God).
- Etc.

The latter word—*orthopraxy*—refers to a concept of "Christian" whose focus is on *behavior*: a "Christian" is one who strives to be a "good" person. One attempt to express what it means to be a "good" person is the Boy Scout oath:

On my honor, I will do my best
To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law;
To help other people at all times;
To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.

And, especially, the "[Scout Law](#)" (referred to in the oath):

A Scout is **Trustworthy**.

A Scout tells the truth. He is honest, and he keeps his promises. People can depend on him.

A Scout is **Loyal**.

A Scout is true to his family, friends, Scout leaders, school, and nation.

A Scout is **Helpful**.

A Scout cares about other people. He willingly volunteers to help others without expecting payment or reward.

A Scout is **Friendly**.

A Scout is a friend to all. He is a brother to other Scouts. He offers his friendship to people of all races and nations, and respects them even if their beliefs and customs are different from his own.

A Scout is **Courteous**.

A Scout is polite to everyone regardless of age or position. He knows that using good manners makes it easier for people to get along.

A Scout is **Kind**.

A Scout knows there is strength in being gentle. He treats others as he wants to be treated. Without good reason, he does not harm or kill any living thing.

A Scout is **Obedient**.

A Scout follows the rules of his family, school, and troop. He obeys the laws of his community and country. If he thinks these rules and laws are unfair, he tries to have them changed in an orderly manner rather than disobeying them.

A Scout is **Cheerful**.

A Scout looks for the bright side of life. He cheerfully does tasks that come his way. He tries to make others happy.

A Scout is **Thrifty**.

A Scout works to pay his own way and to help others. He saves for the future. He protects and conserves natural resources. He carefully uses time and property.

A Scout is **Brave**.

A Scout can face danger although he is afraid. He has the courage to stand for what he thinks is right even if others laugh at him or threaten him.

A Scout is **Clean**.

A Scout keeps his body and mind fit and clean. He chooses the company of those who live by high standards. He helps keep his home and community clean.

A Scout is **Reverent**.

A Scout is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties. He respects the beliefs of others.

Note that I offer the above interpretation of “orthopraxy” not as a definitive one but, rather, as simply one possibility. Personally, I disagree with none of the above points, but would caution one against nationalism—given that the leaders of many (most?) countries—and certainly ours—often engage in nefarious activities (such as rigging elections, torturing “dissidents,” assassinating leaders, etc.). (See William [Blum’s web site](#) for an abundance of evidence regarding this relative to the United States—including access to several chapters from his *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*.³)

Note also that orthopraxy can also be thought of as a type of orthodoxy, in that those who give an orthopraxy interpretation to “Christian” hold the *belief* that being a “Christian” involves primarily (a) having certain behavioral goals as one’s ideal, and (b) striving to live by those behavioral goals. Those who accept the orthopraxy version of “Christian” would be expected to differ somewhat in the *specific* behavioral goals that they would identify as particularly “Christian,” but it is likely that *all* such Christians would agree that the Golden Rule⁴ best summarizes their behavioral goal—at least as a first approximation.

³ Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1995 (but updated several times since then).

⁴ One should *not* do unto others that which one would not done to oneself, and *should* do unto others—whenever possible—that which one *would* like done onto oneself.

Of these two versions of “being a Christian” the only one that has a firm Biblical basis is the latter—orthopraxy—one: It is well known that (a) Jesus was a Jew, (b) as such would have not only learned many stories (about Noah, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.), but learned that what being a Jew primarily involved was knowing and following (to the best of one’s ability) the Law.⁵ Indeed, so oriented was Jesus to the Law that (c) he came to realize that the Law, as it was being promulgated in his time, was an extremely distorted version of the True Law: The Judaism of his time was giving the ancient *covenant* concept an individualistic interpretation, and therefore teaching a “*blame* the victim” version of the Law, when it should have been teaching a “*help* the victim” one. The gospels make clear that Jesus was in an antagonistic relationship with the religious leaders of his day, and this was the basis for that antagonism. (The writer of *Matthew* used the word “hypocrisy” to express this conflict—see, e.g., *Matthew* 23:14, 15⁶).

Having concluded that, from a Biblical standpoint (the relevant one, of course!⁷), being a “Christian”—in the sense of a follower of Jesus⁸—involves having an orthopraxy orientation, three questions arise:

- Would it be of value for “Christians” so defined (or, as I prefer, “Jesuan”) to meet with one another on a regular basis?
- Do church “services” (actually, “meetings” would be a more appropriate term) provide enough value to Jesuans to make their attendance of those meeting worthwhile?
- If not, should Jesuans attempt to “fix” existing meetings, or would it be more sensible for them to simply abandon the churches and initiate meetings more likely to hold value for them?

Let me address each of these questions in turn. Note that the very title of my essay suggests that I would answer the second question in the negative (!). And given that I think it of great value for Jesuans to meet on a regular basis, it should not be surprising that I will in fact be offering an alternate type of meeting below for Jesuans to consider.

⁵ For a fairly lengthy discussion of the Law, see pp. 8 – 26 in my “[Worship: An Exercise in Revisioning](#).”

⁶ Verses 13 – 28 constitute a “diatribe,” a bitter denunciation.

⁷ An assertion that I will, however, be challenging somewhat shortly.

⁸ I prefer “Jesuan” to “Christian” because the [latter](#) is a *theological* concept, not a *historical* one. It asserts that Jesus was the expected “Messiah” of Judaism—which is a theological interpretation of Jesus’s life. It is a *title* given to Jesus (perhaps including by some of his contemporaries), and as such was not a part of his *name*. Thus, it is very possible that Jesus would be offended by, e.g., the title of William T. Stead’s old (1894) [If Christ Came to Chicago](#). I should add, however, that it’s highly likely that he would also disapprove of “Jesuan” (!), given that his self-perception seemingly (using the oldest sources as our guide) was that he was merely a human who was attempting to do that which would be pleasing in God’s eyes.

Can Meeting With Other Jesuans Be of Value?

There is an [anonymous paper](#) available on the internet that deals with “why, where, and how Christians [should] meet,” and I will begin my discussion here by making reference to that paper.⁹

The author begins by referring to “the Round Church,” a “quaint circular Norman building with a medieval oblong tacked on to it,” in Cambridge, England. He notes that the building had become “desperately over-crowded,” which fact forced those attending the church to rethink—“from the Bible”—such issues as “the purpose of a building, the meaning of worship, the purpose of meeting—and the nature of the church.” He continues: “This is more than the story of one church; it has lessons and relevance for every church.” Thereby, the author raises the expectations of the reader—especially if the reader is a Jesuan.

The author then “gets ahead of himself,” however, by noting that commercial plans that had been developing for “a redundant city-centre church, St Andrew the Great,” collapsed, thereby providing the congregation of the Round Church to acquire it and “refurbish it for their own use.” Presumably, the building acquired not only had the advantage of a desirable location, but “could provide seating for over 700 people, and [had] ten ancillary rooms for other activities.” This building, once refurbished, would thereby provide the congregation with a meeting place that would accommodate them all at the same time.

Next, the author notes that the first question that confronted the congregation was: Why meet on Sundays? They answered that question by saying that it was to “worship God,” but then expanded that answer by affirming that “worship is to do with approaching and responding to God rightly, putting him in his rightful place and giving him his due.”

He continues by noting that there is an important difference between the Old Testament concept of worship and the New Testament one. In the Old Testament the “right” approach was (a) tied to a particular place (i.e., the Temple), (b) having particular furniture, with (c) certain people associated with that place, (d) wearing particular clothing, but (e) after particular preparation, (f) using particular ceremonies and offerings (g) at particular times. The author adds, however, that in the Old Testament “there was always a tension,” always “a sense that the revelation was not yet complete, and that all the cultic worship of the Temple was pointing to something else.” (I would doubt that many Jews would agree with this interpretation of the Old Testament—which label they would, of course, reject in favor of “Hebrew Scriptures.”)

The author next declares that when “Jesus [the] Christ” appeared, he “made it clear at once that his coming had changed everything. No longer was the Temple to be the focus of true worship.” The author evidently bases this assertion on the statements in the gospel of *John* (4:21 – 24)

⁹ The web site is for *The Briefing: An International Evangelical Monthly*. The paper itself was reproduced from [Evangelicals Now](#), February, 1993.

where Jesus is quoted as stating that God is spirit, and those who worship God must therefore worship in spirit and truth (the meaning of which is not self-evident—although the author is seemingly oblivious of that fact).

Rather than attempt to clarify what “spirit and truth” might mean, the author launches into a discussion of meetings. He begins by noting that only in *Acts* 13:2, in the New Testament, is the “worship” language of the Old Testament used. “Instead,” he asserts, “it uses the sort of language that immediately follows the quotation we have just considered [that of *Hebrews* 10:19 – 22] from Hebrews: ‘Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near’ (Heb 10:24, 25).”¹⁰ However, he continues by asserting that the “key New Testament word for Christians meeting together is edification, not worship”—noting that “edification” is a “building word”—in the sense of having the same root as “edifice,” I assume he means—but in a “people” sense. That is, although “edification” is usually given an *intellectual* interpretation—one is “edified” by gaining new knowledge, and especially new knowledge that is enlightening—in the case of Christian meetings, the purpose of the meetings is the “building up” of those attending. What this “building up” presumably does for those meeting is that helps them show love—and in general “do good”—during their lives while *not* in Christian meetings.

Put another way, the purpose of “Christian meetings” is to “recharge the batteries” of those attending, so that when they leave the meetings, they will not merely (or only) be better prepared to cope in “the world,” but be so highly *motivated* that they will eagerly engage in loving behaviors toward everyone they encounter—and even beyond. This is not to say that no *learning* (of *what* to do, and *how* to do it) would occur during “Christian meetings.” But the *primary* goal of “Christian meetings” should be to give those attending the *enthusiasm* and *energy* they need to do God’s will in the world. Indeed, if those attending gain those qualities as a result of their attendance, the question of coping will never even arise!

The author seems to emphasize this point by stating that “if we are not already worshiping God when we meet together in church, that meeting will be in serious trouble. But it [i.e., “worshipping God”] is not the primary purpose of our meeting. Nor for the Christian can the term ‘time of worship’ have any meaning, other than referring to his or her entire life. Only pagans have ‘a time of worship’ in any other sense.

As to the *particular nature* of “Christian meetings,” the author notes: “There are no set New Testament patterns . . . , but there are many hints about the sort of things that should characterize them. For example, Christian meetings are to be Spirit-filled (Eph 5:18); Bible-centred (Col 3:16); congregational (Heb 10:24); varied (1 Cor 14:26); characterized by praise and

¹⁰This passage reads as follows in my *Good News Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 1976): “Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.” For the meaning of “Day of the Lord,” go to one of the internet search sites, which will take you to [this one](#), for example.

thanksgiving (Eph 5:18); intelligible (1 Cor 14); done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40), and they should include the breaking of bread (1 Cor 11) and teaching and intercessions (Act 2:42)."

He then directs attention to the building that is to be refurbished, and asks: "What do these [i.e., the above attributes] mean for our building? Clearly, audibility and visibility are very important in any building in which Christians meet. That is not just so that the pastor/teacher should be audible and visible, but so that members of the congregation should be able to see and hear each other." In asserting that members of the congregation should be able to "hear each other," the author seems to mean that it is while they are *reading responsively* and *singing* that they should be able to "hear each other"—for his paper gives no indication that he thinks that they should be *talking* to each other during meetings (i.e., "Christian meetings"). Presumably, he believes that talking with other congregants should be confined to periods *other than* those of "Christian meetings" (e.g., during a "coffee hour," or while one is at home, and has a "Christian" guest).

Audibility and visibility, then, are the primary characteristics that a church building should have—and the author seems to mean by this that those present during a given "Christian meeting" will fall into two basic categories: (a) a clergy member who will read from Holy Scripture and deliver a sermon, and (b) congregants who will be able to see that person clearly, and also hear—and understand—what they person says. Assumedly, there would also be an organist and a choir present, and they would be heard at their appointed times; but their contribution to the meeting would be too minor to merit attention. Their principal role would be to listen to the minister along with everyone else present.

Should the building have any characteristics in addition to audibility and visibility? "But what about a sense of awe and transcendence?" he asks. "Should not a building suited for Christian meetings convey a sense of the numinous to the spirits of those who gather? From Hebrews 12:18 – 29, it would seem that there should be an awe about the Christian gathering. But that awe should be of God and of his assembly, not of the place or its outward trappings If we look to the building to create this sense of awe for us, we are in danger once again of by-passing what Jesus has done for us in redeeming us, and returning to the Old Testament." From a theological standpoint, this statement may have merit; it ignores, however, the fact that there is such a thing as "a psychology of buildings."¹¹

In concluding his paper, the author states that in his church's being forced to relocate "our church activities," this has "caused us to learn much about the nature of the church. We are learning lessons about ourselves and our meetings that are very precious and that we could probably not have learned in any other way. We have learned that we need good theology in order to produce a good building."

Let us now return to the question that prompted the above discussion: Would it be of value for Jesuans to meet with other Jesuans on a regular basis? And the *immediate* question is: Does the

¹¹ There is a vast literature on this subject, including the one book in my library that deals with it: Glenn Robert Lym, *A Psychology of Building: How We Shape ad Experience our Structured Spaces*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980.

above discussion of the Round Church help us answer this question? I would answer this question in the affirmative, for I believe that the key point of importance that the author makes in his presentation is contained in this paragraph (my summary of the paragraph that precedes it):

Put another way, the purpose of “Christian meetings” is to “recharge the batteries” of those attending, so that when they leave the meetings, they will not merely (or only) be better prepared to cope in “the world,” but be so highly *motivated* that they will eagerly engage in loving behaviors toward everyone they encounter—and even beyond. This is not to say that no *learning* (of *what* to do, and *how* to do it) would occur during “Christian meetings.” But the *primary* goal of “Christian meetings” should be to give those attending the *enthusiasm* and *energy* they need to do God’s will in the world. Indeed, if those attending gain those qualities as a result of their attendance, the question of coping will never even arise!

I agree fully with this statement, but would add—for the sake of clarification—that the “do God’s work in the world” are my words, not the author’s, and that I might very well interpret that phrase somewhat differently than the author referred to above. As this is a convenient point to comment on that matter, I will do so now.

My starting point here is the obvious fact that the world that Jesus lived in was very different from the one that we do today. An implication of that fact—for me—is that, e.g., the Golden Rule does not have the same relevance today that it did 2000 years ago. Jesus lived in a land that was occupied—by the Romans—so that his teaching *necessarily reflected that fact*. I am fully aware of the fact that the statements of Jesus “recorded” in the Bible are usually taken, by “believers,” as “gospel” (!). But I would assert that the *fact* that we live under different circumstances than Jesus did, should cause us to think about the Golden Rule, e.g., *differently* than Jesus’s contemporaries in Galilee, etc.

Because Jesus conducted his “ministry” in an occupied land, his teachings needed to take that fact into consideration: The “good” that one could do was confined to treating others well, so that the Golden Rule *needed* to be interpreted in narrow terms, from the perspective of us moderns. Needed to be interpreted narrowly by Jesus, on the one hand, and by his listeners, on the other hand.

We moderns (living in the United States) do not live in an occupied country. It’s true, I’ll grant, that we seem to be moving in the direction of a fascist police state—and it’s certainly the case that the rich, and rich corporations, are gaining increasing control over our society (so that our country is becoming ever more inegalitarian). But ignoring these (highly unpleasant) facts, the fact of the matter is that we modern citizens of the United States do not need to give the Golden Rule a narrow meaning.

In doing so, let us first ask: What is *accomplished* in following the Golden Rule? And the answer is that in doing so, we contribute (we hope!) to the well-being of others. This means that the Golden Rule is not an *end*; rather, it is a *means* to an end—the well-being of others. Once we come to *that* realization, we moderns can ask ourselves: Is it *only* possible for us Jesuans to contribute to the well-being of others by engaging in direct acts of kindness—whether random or

not? And my answer is that we moderns—unlike those around Jesus—have at least four avenues that we can pursue:

- Direct acts of kindness to others that we encounter in our lives—i.e., acts in accord with the Golden Rule, interpreted narrowly.
- Monetary gifts to organizations that engage in feeding the hungry, providing medical care to those needing it, providing transportation services to the blind and otherwise disabled, providing shelter to those who have been foreclosed on, etc.
- Engaging in political activity—either as an informed voter, or as one who runs for political office. (Where are the Jesuans in the latter category?! Many politicians claim to be followers of Jesus—including President Barrack Obama—but where are the examples of politicians who actually do?!)
- Engaging in efforts at societal system change. The basis of such efforts is the conclusion that virtually all of the problems that we face—as citizens of the United States, the world—are of a *systemic* nature. That is, they are “fruits” of the nature of our societal system, so that given that, they will be solved only via societal system change. This possibility has been given little attention for decades, but was very much “in the air” during the 19th century—e.g., [Robert Owen](#) [1771 – 1858] and [Charles Fourier](#) [1772 - 1837].

All of the above, I would argue, can fall into the category “doing God’s will.” And I suggest that that fact should be kept in mind by those Jesuans who choose to meet together on a regular basis. Note, however, that I have still not answered the question of *why* it might be of value for Jesuans to meet on a regular basis.

The first point that I would make in favor of regular meetings is that we humans are social creatures who need contact with other human beings. It’s true that humans *vary* from individual to individual in many characteristics, including their need for contact with other human beings; but it’s also true that most of us need “people contact” for our psychological contact. Indeed, if a human, upon birth, were given no care, it would die (except for the rare cases where abandoned children have been cared for by members of another species—in which case, however, they develop as “feral” beings).

Second, by meeting with others, one can share one’s ideas and knowledge with others, and receive the same in return.

And, finally, one gain motivation—enthusiasm and energy—as a result of one’s interactions with fellow Jesuans. Not that one can—or should—confine one’s interactions to like-minded others, of course; indeed, one cannot be a “good Jesuan” if one does so! But meetings involve—or at least *can* involve—interactions of a different nature; and meetings with fellow Jesuans thereby have the potential to “build them up,” as noted earlier in discussing a paper.

This, however, brings us to the second question posed earlier in this paper: Do church “services”

provide enough value to Jesuans to make their attendance of those meeting worthwhile?

Are Church “Services” Worth Attending?

I put “services” here in quotation marks because the major conclusion of the preceding section was that the purpose of “Christian meetings” is to *prepare* one for “service.” To refer to a church meeting as a “service” is to “put the cart before the horse.”

The question to be addressed in this section, then, is: Do church services prepare one for service? And in answering this question, it will be useful to begin by describing a typical church service—whoops! I meant to say meeting!

Within the church structure we find a large room, referred to as the “sanctuary,”¹² with “pews”¹³ facing the front of the room. At the front is a raised platform, with a lectern (“pulpit” is the appropriate term) near the farthest-up pew, and one or more elaborate chairs (among other paraphernalia) behind the lectern. The minister occupies one of these chairs, and a layperson may occupy one of the other chairs. In addition, this area may have a special seating area for the choir—or the choir members may occupy the balcony. The pews will be occupied—to some degree—and those occupying them will be awake (for *part* of the meeting, at least!).

The “meeting” itself consists of the following (but not necessarily in the order listed):

- An organ prelude.
- Announcements.
- Congregational singing.
- Singing by the choir.
- Special music—e.g., a violin solo.
- Prayers delivered by the minister.
- Certain ritual activities (e.g., “communion”).
- Readings from Holy Scripture; e.g., the layperson may read from the Old Testament, followed by the minister reading from the New Testament. Regarding the latter, there may be a gospel reading, followed by an epistle reading. For the gospel reading, those in attendance may be asked to stand (“in reverence”).
- A sermon—delivered by the minister, of course.

¹² Providing sanctuary *from what?*!

¹³ Usually, they don’t stink, so why are they given that name?!

- A collection—after all, the church needs money!
- A “coffee hour.”

From what I have described, a reader may very well respond: “I understand why you refuse to call this a ‘service.’ By why call it a ‘meeting’ either? It’s true that people have gathered in a particular place at a particular time, but wouldn’t ‘gathering’ be a better descriptor of what is going on than ‘meeting’? For no *interaction* is going on—except during the ‘coffee hour.’ Otherwise, most of those present are simply sitting in a pew (a) listening to something being said, (b) listening to music being sung and/or played, (c) participating in a responsive reading, and (d) singing when called upon to sing.”

Yes, indeed! Let’s look again at the purpose that Jesuan meetings should have, and ask ourselves whether it is met by the typical Christian meeting:

Put another way, the purpose of “Christian meetings” is to “recharge the batteries” of those attending, so that when they leave the meetings, they will not merely (or only) be better prepared to cope in “the world,” but be so highly *motivated* that they will eagerly engage in loving behaviors toward everyone they encounter—and even beyond. This is not to say that no *learning* (of *what* to do, and *how* to do it) would occur during “Christian meetings.” But the *primary* goal of “Christian meetings” should be to give those attending the *enthusiasm* and *energy* they need to do God’s will in the world. Indeed, if those attending gain those qualities as a result of their attendance, the question of coping will never even arise!

Whether those in attendance will *learn* anything that will help them in their Christian lives will depend largely on the quality of the minister—and whether or not they stay awake! I mention this latter point because from my description of a typical church meeting it should be evident that there is little to keep one awake! And even if one *does* manage to stay awake, what s/he learns may be historical facts rather than information that will be helpful in living by the Golden Rule (interpreted expansively).

Beyond this, however, one is not likely to find one’s experience during this meeting *motivating*. And the reason for this should be obvious: One has not interacted with the others present in a *religious* manner for the simple reason that the *structure* of the meeting has prevented one from doing so! Interacting with others during a church meeting would be considered “irreverent,” and rude besides—because it would interfere with the “message” being delivered by the minister. Some Jesuans might choose to attend church meetings recognizing that much of their time is ill-spent in doing so, but are drawn to the sermons of the minister—and her/his personality as well (for the minister may demonstrate that one can be a full-blown human while also being a Jesuan). But most Jesuans will find church meetings a waste of time (and money!), and will wish for an alternative. Herein, then, I offer one! It is obvious to me that it would be a waste of time to try to “fix” the existing churches, so that if, as a Jesuan, one wishes to meet with other Jesuans, and do so in a religiously meaningful way, one will need to attend a very different type of meeting—such as what I propose below.

An Alternate Type of Meeting for Jesuans¹⁴

What I propose below is a new institution, the New Word Fellowship (NeWF), with the inspiration for that institution coming from several sources. First, several passages in the New Testament:

- Verses 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, and 16:7 in the gospel of *John*. In this section of the gospel Jesus is talking about his imminent departure, and is emphasizing the point that upon his leaving a Helper will be left to be with us. This “Helper” is variously translated as the Holy Spirit, a Comforter, and an Advocate.
- In Romans 7:18 – 20 Paul states (using my *Good News Bible*): “I know that good does not live in me—that is, in my human nature. For even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it. I don’t do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do.” (I need to add here, however, that recent research gives one good reason to question Paul’s assertion that his “human nature” prevented him from doing good. Paul’s “human nature” should be replaced with “socialized nature.” See, e.g., Frans de Waal’s *Good Natured: The Origin of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*¹⁵ and Dacher Keltner’s *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life*.¹⁶)
- In Galatians 5:19–23 Paul states (*Good News Bible*): “What human nature [read “socialized nature”] does is quite plain. It shows itself in immoral, filthy, and indecent actions; in worship of idols and witchcraft. People become enemies and they fight; they become jealous, angry, and ambitious. They separate into parties and groups; they are envious, get drunk, have orgies, and do other things like these. I warn you now as I have before: those who do these things will not possess the [Kingdom of God](#). But the [Holy] Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. There is no law against such things as these.”
- Hebrews 10:24, 25 (using the version by the author discussed in the first section): “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Second, the NeWF draws on certain practices developed by an early (second century) Christian

¹⁴ Much of the content of this section has been derived from pp. 43 – 60 of my “Worship: An Exercise in Revisioning,” previously cited.

¹⁵ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

¹⁶ New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

named Marcus (who lived in Lyon, France).¹⁷

Third, the NeWF draws upon a tradition associated with certain Native American groups for centuries.¹⁸

Before discussing the NeWF, I need to provide some background, and will begin by presenting a classification of meetings, commenting briefly on the categories in that classification, and then “place” the NeWF in the classification.

A. *A Classification and Discussion of Meetings*

I. Conventional Church “Services”

II. Discussion Groups

A. Fixed Leader

B. Leaderless

C. Rotating Leader

1. Unstructured

2. Structured

a. Fixed topics

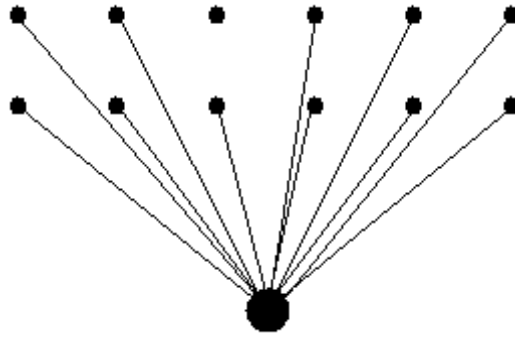
b. Saying what one feels “led” to say.

1. Conventional Church “Service”

This was discussed above, and therefore needs no further discussion. It can be illustrated diagrammatically as follows:

¹⁷Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 179, pp. 41-43.

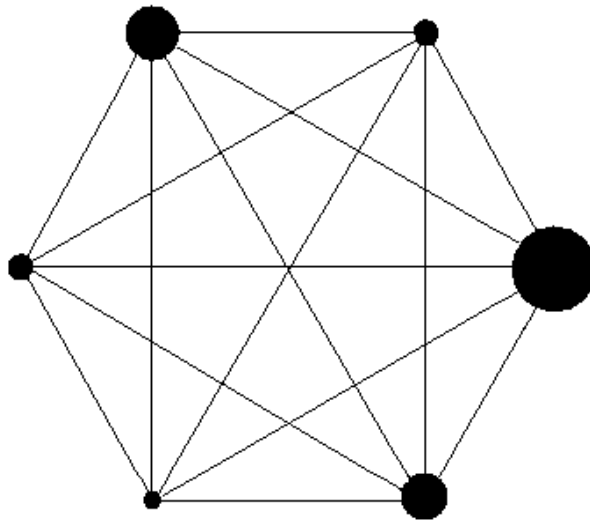
¹⁸Medicine Story, “Circles of Freedom,” *Talking Stick: The Voice of Mettanokit* (Summer 1993), p. 5; and Lynn Murray Willeford, “Calling the Circle,” *New Age Journal* (May/June 1996), pp. 47, 50, 52, 54, 136-37. The periodical in which the Medicine Story piece was published appeared in my mailbox “out of the blue.” How thankful I am for having received this valuable article!



The large circle here represents the minister, the small circles the individuals attending a given “service.” Note that the lines here emanate from the minister, indicating that the minister speaks to all of those present, and those present hear what the minister says—except for those who fall asleep (represented by the small circle with no line connecting to the minister)!

2. Fixed Leader Discussion Group

The figure which follows can be thought of as applicable to all of the following categories. In this case the circles represent participants in a discussion group (in the illustration just six), and the size of the circle is proportional to the amount of time the person in question tends to spend talking during a given session.



In the case of this fixed leader discussion group, there is a single person who has been designated the group’s leader (assume that the largest circle in the figure represents that person), and the leader (perhaps with input from those attending) selects what to discuss—passages in the Bible, a

new religious book, a topic of current interest, etc. Note that in this case no minister is present—for the simple reason that none is needed!¹⁹

3. Leaderless Discussion Group

The sessions of this type of group would be rather “open,” and might be thought of as “bull sessions.” One attends sessions when one feels like attending, and those present begin talking about whatever “comes up.” *Who* starts the discussion will vary from session to session, but the tendency will be for some to more of the talking than others—this pattern being more or less stable over time.

4. Discussion Group with Rotating Leadership: Unstructured

A discussion group may have a leader, but some—or all—of the members of the group may take turns leading the group. *What* is discussed will depend on what the group decides. This might be announced in advance, or as the meeting begins.

5. Rotating Leadership: Structured with Fixed Topics

If discussions that occur during a given meeting are “structured,” this means that certain mutually agreed-upon rules have been established. If fixed topics are also involved, this means that the leader for a particular session selects the topic to be discussed.

6. Rotating Leadership: Structured with Participants Saying What One Feels “Led” to Say

In this case there are mutually-agreed-upon rules governing the discussion, but the leader for a given session selects the topic for discussion at the beginning of the session, choosing as the topic one that s/he feels “led” to choose for that session.

How does the NeWF fit in with these categories? As one might guess from the way I have created the classification, the NeWF falls into the last category—II. C. 2. c. (or number 6).

B. Defining New Word Fellowship

What is a New Word Fellowship? At its most basic level it is a discussion group (on the surface not terribly unlike the self-improvement Junto club established by Benjamin Franklin in 1727). It differs from the ordinary discussion group, however, in that its participants assume (for one thing) that they will receive guidance from God during their deliberations—and may even experience Spirit-indwelling (which manifests itself as an altered state of consciousness).

¹⁹ It might be noted that Adam Smith [1723 – 1790] labeled “churchmen” as “unproductive”—along with “lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds; players, buffoons, musicians, opera-singers, opera-dancers, &c.” *The Wealth of Nations*, Vol. I, Book II, Chapter 2, pp. 295 – 296. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd, 1910 (available on the <http://books.google.com> web site).

Participants in a given Fellowship meet at a specified place on a regular (or not) basis. As they arrive at the meeting place, they are given a slip of paper by a functionary (the “Bishop”²⁰); they write their name on the slip, then give it to the Bishop, who then deposits it in a container. When the appointed time for the meeting arrives, the Bishop draws one slip (i.e., name) from the container—at random. (Use of a random procedure is based on the ancient Hebrew conviction that it is God who chooses when selections are made at random²¹) The first name drawn by the Bishop designates the *Prophet* for that session—that is, the person who will initiate the discussion, and be authorized to keep the discussion “on track.”

(For the sake of clarification, I need to add at this point that the discussion that follows assumes one Fellowship session per congregation at any given time. Given that the ideal size of a Fellowship is about 12 individuals, if 50 members of a given congregation were present at the meeting place on a given day, the Bishop would create four Fellowship sessions for that day. For example, the first name chosen would be the Prophet for the first Fellowship, the thirteenth name the Prophet for the second group, the twenty-fifth name the Prophet for the third group, and the thirty-eighth name the Prophet for the fourth group formed that day. I might add that this procedure for forming subgroups within a given congregation at a given time means that the possible combinations of others in one’s group can be huge indeed. The relevant formula here is $n!/[(r!)(n - r)!]$, where n is the number of others in one’s whole congregation (present at a given time) and r is the number of others in one’s particular subgroup at a given time. I would suggest, however, that the Bishop simply use the chart presented in the Appendix.)

Note that rather than the position of Prophet having a permanent occupant, it has a *new* occupant for each session. In other words, a rotational system is used, one based on the use of sortilege (i.e., a random procedure). This means not only that participants in a Fellowship do not know in advance who the Prophet will be for a given session. It also means (for the benefit of those who have some background in statistics) that each participant will, over time, occupy the position of Prophet about the same number of times. I realize that living, as we do, in a hierarchical society, most of us are used to there being “bosses” and “grunts”: despite the fact that we supposedly live in a society within which all are equal, we all know that that is far from true (even in a legal sense).²² Consequently, most of us have become used to thinking of there being two classes of people, leaders and followers—and may therefore find it difficult to accept the notion that

²⁰The last will be first, and the first last!—as the Bible says (e.g., Mark 10:31).

²¹Those who know their New Testament will also recall that after the death of Judas Iscariot, his successor was chosen by use of a random procedure (according to Acts 1:26, at any rate).

²²See, e.g., writings by Michael Parenti and G. William Domhoff.

anyone can be a leader. The Fellowship, however, is based on the assumption that everyone is not only important and has something to offer, but that anyone *can* be a leader.

Once a Prophet has been chosen, and the participants are seated, the Prophet speaks—i.e., allows God to speak through him/her. The Prophet is expected to speak about that which s/he feels genuinely “called” to talk about—whatever that happens to be. So that although participants in a Fellowship all accept Jesus’s love of the neighbor command as their central “creed,” the Prophet should feel no obligation to speak words directly pertinent to that creed.²³

Whether or not the participants are seated around a table, they will be seated in a circle, and a single candle is assumed to have been placed (by the Bishop) at the center of the circle—the flame symbolizing God: a real, if intangible, entity.²⁴ It is placed at the center of the group to signify that the participants all wish to place God at the center of their lives (with, of course, any agnostics and atheists present excused from so perceiving the candle).

After the Prophet has delivered a message (of perhaps 15-20 minutes), the others have an opportunity to react to the Prophet’s remarks. Discussion proceeds with the use of a “talking hoop”²⁵ passed around the group in a clockwise manner, beginning with the person to the Prophet’s immediate left. That is, a hoop (symbolizing the unity of all things) is passed from participant to participant, the understanding being that only the person holding the hoop has the right to speak (the Prophet having, however, the right—indeed, the responsibility—to intervene any time s/he believes this to be necessary for the good of the group).

²³I am reminded here of Matthew Fox’s statement that psychologist Otto Rank, in *Art and Artist*, had declared that there is a profound purposelessness in all true art. (*Wrestling With The Prophets: Essays on Creation Spirituality and Everyday Life*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.) The statement occurs on p. 211 in Chapter 11 (“Otto Rank on the Artistic Journey as a Spiritual Journey, the Spiritual Journey as an Artistic Journey”).

²⁴In addition, I would like to think that what Paul Shepard states regarding our ancient ancestors sitting around a fire apply to NeWF participants sitting in a circle, with a lit candle at the center. See pp. 155 - 56 in his previously-cited *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. For example, Shepard states (p. 155): “Fire was perhaps the first metaphor and therefore the master stimulus to deliberation, the symbol of life itself.” Shepard would assert that we humans—including us moderns—are drawn to sitting around a fire at night because selection processes, acting on our biology, have “designed” us for such an activity.

²⁵Another possibility would be to use a vine segment, the allusion here being to John 15:5. Also, a rope segment might be considered, given that a rope consists of a number of different strands—thus symbolizing well the goal of a New Word Fellowship to combine unity with diversity. This latter suggestion has its origin in Gus DiZerega, *Pagans & Christians: The Personal Spiritual Experience*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2004, p. 78. Originally published in 2001.

When a given participant has finished speaking, s/he passes the hoop to the first person to the left, who then speaks, passes the hoop to the next person, etc. This process continues until no one has anything to add to the discussion (or an agreed-upon time limit is reached).

C. Guiding Principles²⁶

Certain principles would (ideally) be followed during Fellowship sessions, and it will be useful simply to list them here:

1. Members of the group must accept the above premises and conclusions; i.e., at least *that* much uniformity must exist within the group. They must regard each other member of the group (each other *human*, in fact) as their equal, and accept as a truism that one person's views are as worthy of expression and consideration as those of any other person in the group.
2. Each member of the group should have an opportunity to “speak one’s truth”²⁷ and, indeed, ideally all members will speak for about the same length of time during a given session. This ideal likely would never be met, however, because during a given session one or more members may not feel “led” to speak—and certainly one should not feel an obligation to speak just for the sake of speaking. On the other hand, though, if one feels very talkative during a given session, one should attempt to restrain oneself: monopolization of the talking is strongly discouraged (and should, in fact, be *prevented* by the Prophet).
3. When one is speaking, one should feel at liberty to say what one genuinely feels “called” to say. Which is not to say, however, that one should resort to vulgarity, or impropriety in some other way (e.g., speaking in an undiplomatic manner).
4. When one is speaking, one should avoid criticizing others in the group, or trying to discredit what they say. One should show respect for others in the group—keeping in mind that “loving the neighbor” entails allowing others to come to their own conclusions (and choosing their own spiritual path), rather than imposing one’s own point of view on others. If one has a viewpoint that is in opposition to one that someone else has expressed, one should simply state one’s *own* (contrary) viewpoint without comment on what someone else has expressed.

²⁶Compare with Paul's comments in I Corinthians 14:29 - 32.

²⁷This principle is, of course, automatically followed by virtue of the fact that a “talking hoop” (or whatever) is used to help control discussions during the session.

5. When one is *not* speaking, one should listen—not just be preparing one’s *own* “speech” for when it is time for one to speak again. One is expected to be (or at least *become*, with time) convinced that one does not possess the whole truth; that, rather, one is like one of the blind men feeling the elephant. So that given that one wishes to know *more* of the truth, one needs to listen attentively to others as they speak.
6. If discussion seems to be proceeding down a certain path “naturally,” one should not (as Prophet) try to divert it down some other path—either because one doesn’t like that path, or because one has certain notions of where the discussion *should* head, and believes one has the right to divert the discussion in that direction.
7. All should be aware of the danger of the group becoming too “cozy.” Thus, each person present (and not just the Prophet) should consider the possibility that at times s/he should act as a (diplomatic) “devil’s advocate” (but only when it is one’s turn to speak—unless one is the Prophet for that particular session).
8. There is always the possibility that some who join a given NeWFian congregation will not “fit in” well. Therefore, a congregation should decide early on in its existence how it will handle that eventuality. It might decide, e.g., that at the beginning of any meeting any member will have the right to call an Exclusion Vote. What could be done, then, is that the Bishop would distribute “ballots” to all of those present, and that those present would then write down the names of those members that they thought should be expelled from the congregation. The Bishop would then collect the ballots, count the number of names during the service, and then announce the results at the end of the service—announcing only the names (if any) of those to be expelled. The basis for expelling a member might be, e.g., that if a given name appeared at least $0.65x$ times, that person would be expelled from membership in the given congregation (where x = the number present that day).

Note that key assumptions underlying a Fellowship are that each member of the group has a unique viewpoint, that this is good, and that individual spiritual development (defined in the broadest possible sense) on the part of each member should be fostered. It seems to me that these assumptions are *inherent* in Jesus’s use of parable-telling in the (canonical) gospels—so that there is, with the New Word Fellowship, emulation of a key element of the *style* of Jesus’s “ministry” as presented in the gospels. The speaker of a parable implicitly assumes that each of his/her listeners is unique, that that is good, and that each hearer will—and should—interpret the parable in a way that is meaningful to that person; and that over time each person will find ever more meanings in a given parable. The parallel between Jesus’s use of the parable in the gospels and use, by us moderns, of the Fellowship is not, of course, a perfect one. But I am pleased that

the Fellowship has important characteristics in common with the use of parables by the Jesus of the gospels.²⁸

D. Expected Outcomes

In this section I identify and discuss major consequences that I associate with participation in Fellowship sessions, doing so using two different approaches—first a *generic* approach (i.e., one that focuses on *types* of consequences), and then a *genetic* (i.e., *causally-oriented*) one.²⁹ I might add here that if there is magic in ritual,³⁰ then so too can there be magic in “institutional furniture.”³¹ The “magic” in a New Word Fellowship, it seems to me, lies in one’s being aware of the possible consequences associated with participation in a Fellowship. That is, if one knows in advance what effects participation in a Fellowship may have on oneself, this may increase the likelihood that participation will *have* those effects—a self-fulfilling prophecy. The point here is that humans are complex creatures, and that although it is true that the situation one finds oneself in (institutional and otherwise) likely will have some effect on one’s thinking and behavior, foreknowledge of possible consequences of participation can also impact one’s thinking and behavior.

Let me begin here by noting that University of Wisconsin-Madison philosopher Max C. Otto,³² in discussing his concept of “realistic idealism” years ago, gave the example of a conflict situation that was resolved amicably. The conflict involved the owners of a (gasoline) “filling station” in a small town who wanted to cut down some elm trees, and town residents who

²⁸One with a scientific background might say that the New Word Fellowship represents an “operationalization”—for the present, and United States society—of the approach to ministry used by Jesus centuries ago, in a different part of the world.

²⁹I might note here that I see Fellowship sessions as involving *ritualized* discussion, and believe that that ritualization has important—and multitudinous—consequences. Relevant here is Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991. On p. 71 Driver asserts that the “major functions of ritual . . . [are] making and preserving order, fostering community, and effecting transformation.” Driver then devotes Chapter 7 to “Order” (pp. 131 - 51), Chapter 8 to “Community” (pp. 152 - 65), and Chapter 9 to “Transformation” (pp. 166 - 91).

³⁰Driver, *op. cit.*

³¹Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 210. Introduction by Robert Lekachman. Originally published by The Macmillan Company, 1899.

³²*The Human Enterprise: An Attempt to Relate Philosophy to Daily Life*. New York: F. S. Crofts & Co., 1940. See Section vii (pp. 146 - 49) of Chapter V (“Realistic Idealism,” pp. 128 - 53).

opposed that action. Otto noted that the conflict was resolved by a “young man,” and emphasized that this young man did not propose a *compromise*—i.e., a solution that by its very nature is one that is *accepted* by all parties concerned, but *satisfies* none of them. Rather, the young man proposed a *creative*—i.e., a higher-level—solution; a solution that not only *satisfied* both parties completely, but (thereby) *removed the acrimony* that had developed between the parties. Otto added that such solutions are not only *desirable* (obviously!), but *possible*. Unfortunately, however, Otto offered no guidelines for achieving such solutions.

I suspect, though, that Dr. Otto would approve (were he alive today), with enthusiasm, the New Word Fellowship because it is designed (for one thing) to produce creative ideas. Not that it is so *guaranteed*, of course; but creative ideas should be a common occurrence in Fellowship sessions. Creative ideas that serve to resolve conflicts, on the one hand—but other types of creative ideas as well. Also, the fact that a Fellowship fosters the achievement of creative ideas concerning which there can be a *consensus* has, in turn, various consequences—discussed below under two headings. Finally, the fact that the creative ideas achieved can be thought of as having been revealed by Deity (and undoubtedly *will* be by some participants) *itself* can have various additional consequences (also commented upon below).

1. Outcomes: Generic Approach

I have already made a few comments on outcomes, but below discuss them in more detail, using first a *generic* approach—doing so under three headings: intellectual, sociological, and personal. After having used that approach, I use a *genetic* one.

Intellectual

Two factors, I believe, account for the creativity that would occur during sessions (or afterward, as a result of the stimulation that occurred *during* a given session). First, those participating in a Fellowship would have certain things in common, but would also be diverse in various respects—and this mixture of uniformity and diversity would conduce creativity. A certain degree of homogeneity is needed in a group for it to function effectively as a group; but a certain degree of diversity is needed (for a discussion group) if it is to produce creative ideas and decisions.

But a certain degree of diversity is not in itself enough. Members of a Fellowship, if they are to produce creative ideas/decisions, need to interact with one another in a harmonious manner. In recognizing this fact, I have designed the Fellowship in such a way as to promote such interaction. That is, discussion in a Fellowship proceeds in a *structured* fashion, one that is institutionalized; the intent of that design is to prevent the occurrence of acrimonious exchanges, encourage honest expression of one's views, and encourage consideration of the views of others. My hope is that the design of the Fellowship—along with variety in participants—is such as to conduce creativity. Insofar as it is discovered (through actual experience) that the Fellowship's

design is flawed so far as that goal is concerned, my hope is that the participants will become aware of those flaws, and will then act to correct them.

Insofar as one thinks of a Fellowship as having the capability of producing “good” *decisions*, one way of looking at this is that each of us is “crazy” in some way, but that if a *group* is involved in making a decision—and uses a procedure analogous to that of a Fellowship—the individual “crazinesses” will get cancelled out. At any rate, this was the theory used by the group of individuals who created “Feeling Therapy.”³³ (It’s good, isn’t it, that therapists—some of them, at any rate—realize that they are not completely sane! Or is it scary?!)

Sociological

Precisely because I foresee that creative ideas and decisions will emerge from Fellowship sessions, I believe that there will be sociological implications. Discussion of a given topic would be expected to proceed (usually, at any rate) until some sort of consensus is reached, and it is reasonable to expect that all (or virtually so) participants will have contributed to that consensus—and that each *knows* that s/he has. *That* fact will generate in each participant a certain degree of enthusiasm; and *that* fact, in turn—combined with the fact that all members of the group are in *agreement* about something—will help to bring the group together. In fact, I suspect that not only will a feeling of solidarity/community develop in the group as a consequence of the achievement of a creative consensus, but an *enthusiastic* such feeling.

Had other “rules of engagement” been established, members of the group may have quickly become involved in acrimonious exchanges, so that not only would no consensus emerge, but the group would not develop a sense of solidarity. In fact, the group might simply dissolve. I am hoping, however, that the Fellowship has been designed in such a way that not only will creativity be stimulated, but an intense feeling of *community* on the part of participants. Insofar as “fine tuning” is needed in the Fellowship’s design on this score, it will be done whenever needed, I would hope. Institutions seem to have a tendency to ossify; I hope, however, that the design of the Fellowship is such that “hardening of the arteries” would never occur.

Personal

There are, I believe, three types of *personal* consequences that participation in a Fellowship can have for participants. First, participants are likely to acquire certain *behavioral habits*: speaking

³³See Werner Karle, Lee Woldenberg, and Joseph Hart, “Feeling Therapy: Transformation in Psychotherapy,” in *Modern Therapies*, edited by Virginia Binder, Arnold Binder, and Bernard Rimland. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976, p. 81.

one's mind honestly and with conviction; being courteous in one's interactions with others; becoming a good listener, more prone to consider the ideas that others have to offer; and more modest in one's claims regarding what one knows. Regarding this latter point, I believe it likely that participants will, over time, come to see themselves as possessing *part* of the truth, but *just* part—so that it is wise for them to listen to what others have to say, because others *also* have part (but not all) of the truth.

Anyone who has observed people over the years will have noticed that some individuals seem to have a proclivity to try (if but unconsciously) to control³⁴ others, while other people seem to be rather passive and susceptible to control/manipulation by others—even seemingly welcoming it. These tendencies³⁵ may have, in part, a genetic basis, but both are nevertheless objectionable. Fortunately, I believe that participation in a Fellowship will help wean individuals in the first category from their tendency to be overly-assertive and domineering; and also foster in the second sort of people a greater degree of self-confidence and assertiveness. In other words, I see the Fellowship as an *equalizing* force that can counter “natural” tendencies toward hierarchy in favor of more egalitarian relationships between people.

Second, participants may develop, and be able to sustain, certain *feelings*: feeling, e.g., enthusiastic, optimistic, and energetic. And these feelings will not only mean that participants will acquire a sense of well-being as a result of their participation. In addition, they will experience improvement in their physical,³⁶ emotional, and mental health. And their high level of well-being will not only enable them to *plan* well, but *work* well in the event that they have planned some course of action involving them (or some of them) as a group.

Finally, the Fellowship experience can lead to an *altered state of consciousness* for some, if not all, participants: different people experiencing a “natural high” at different times, and for different durations. This “high” (resulting, I suspect, from the achievement of a creative consensus) will not only give one well-being, but may very well then become itself a further *source* of additional creative ideas.

³⁴They may perceive this as exercising “leadership,” rather. That is, they may put a positive “spin” on their objectional behavior.

³⁵For a somewhat old, but excellent, discussion see Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: On Women, Men, and Morals*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1985.

³⁶Including psychosomatic ones. On the topic of such illnesses see the old, but still fascinating, A. T. W. Simeons, *Man's Presumptuous Brain: An Evolutionary Interpretation of Psychosomatic Disease*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1960.

But another consequence of becoming “high” is that one may begin to perceive what might be termed “spirit” in the things around one, especially in other people (in which case the term “soul” would be appropriate). In so perceiving other people, one’s behavior toward them will be affected in that one will strive to be considerate and courteous toward them, even loving. And insofar as one sees spirit in the *natural* world one will attempt to refrain from doing anything that might desecrate it, including littering. The idea here is that if one perceives spirit in things, in effect one regards them as *holy*, and therefore has reverence for them; given *that*, one behaves (or strives to) toward them in a manner that will not involve harm—and may very well involve the opposite. Writer Bill McKibben has observed (in *The End of Nature*, I believe) that he found it peculiar that Christians on the one hand claim to believe that God created the earth (along with the rest of the cosmos), but seem to feel no compunction in polluting and otherwise desecrating earth. Perhaps the explanation for this seeming paradox is that Christians tend to conceive God exclusively as a discrete *transcendent* Being, rather than as an *immanent* entity.³⁷ And are too narrow-minded in their thinking to recognize that such pigeon-holing of God is (from, e.g., a Buddhist perspective³⁸) blasphemous.

Finally, some (e.g., me) may relate the Christian concept of a Holy Spirit with a natural high.³⁹ On the one hand, they may perceive the experience of a high as “possession” by the Holy Spirit;

³⁷Few Christians seem to understand the fact that “God” can be—and has been—conceived in a variety of ways. For an excellent recent discussion of the God concept see Daniel C. Maguire, “More People: Less Earth: The Shadow of Man-Kind,” in (pp. 1 - 63) *Ethics for a Small Planet: New Horizons on Population, Consumption, and Ecology*, by Maguire and Larry L. Rasmussen. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998. Dan is a Professor of Ethics at Marquette University. Also of value here is Chapter Four (“God: The Heart of Reality”) in (pp. 61 - 79) Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. HarperSanFrancisco. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003.

³⁸See Raymond Panikkar, “Nirvana and the Awareness of the Absolute,” in (pp. 81 - 99) *The God Experience: Essays in Hope*, edited by Joseph P. Whelan, S.J. New York: Newman Press, 1971.

³⁹Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* and the movie *Groundhog Day* (starring Bill Murray) are famous examples of individuals undergoing a personal transformation—becoming Spirit-filled, one might say. In the former, Scrooge is forced to observe his life at different points in time, whereas in the latter Phil Connors is forced to live a given day over and over until he becomes a new person. Unfortunately, not only does neither of these works have much relevance for real-world people interested in achieving personal transformation. Both are naive in not realizing that societies are systems, meaning in part that there is congruence between the institutions of the society and the dominant value system associated with those “peopling” the society. Meaning further that it is foolish to expect significant values change without concomitant institutional change. I have developed a strategy for bringing about societal system change while recognizing the interrelated nature of institutions and values, but this is not the place to present that strategy.

and if they do this, they may begin to lose the perception of God as a discrete transcendent entity “out there” some place. Rather, they may begin to think of God as a *Presence* (in the sense of Matthew 18:20, but referring to God rather than Jesus). On the other hand, they may perceive creative ideas they receive as “revelations” from God (perceived as a transcendent Being). Note that these two ways of relating Deity to a “high” are not necessarily in agreement, for the first clearly involves perceiving Deity as immanent in a special sense (a Presence within certain humans), whereas the second seemingly involves perceiving Deity as a discrete transcendent Being. It would seem, however, that some who think of creative ideas as having their source in Deity would also be able to conceive of Deity as immanent (in people, at least), and would thereby be able to think of their “high” as also constituting “possession” by the Holy Spirit (conceived as a Presence rather than discrete transcendent Being).

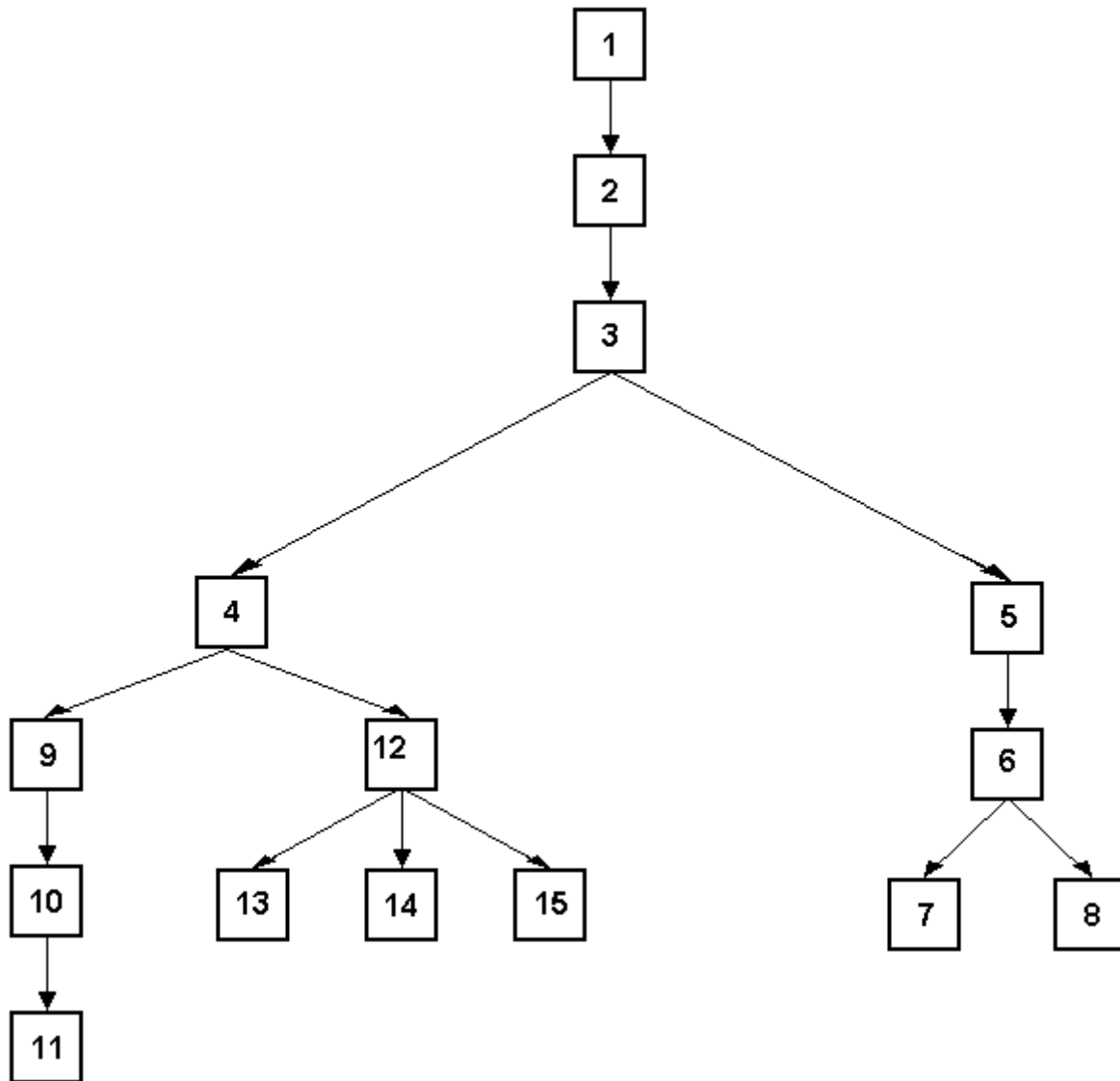
2. Outcomes: Genetic Approach

To further comment on consequences associated with Fellowship participation, let me next use a different approach (one focusing on causal relationships), basing my discussion on the following diagram (next page).

Each numbered comment below refers to the corresponding number on the diagram. The discussion that follows is intended to complement that given earlier in this section, not duplicate it. Overlap exists between the two discussions, but some important points made earlier are not repeated below; and, on the other hand, the discussion below adds some points not made above. Together, the two presentations should give the reader a fairly clear picture of the consequences that I foresee for Fellowship sessions. If I discuss only *positive* consequences, that is because that’s all I foresee!

1. During the course of a Fellowship session creative ideas (i.e., new understandings, insights, ideas regarding what certain individuals or the group might do, etc.) may be received by one or more participants. At any rate, different perspectives are likely to be presented, and the various thoughts spoken (whether or not original to the speaker) can be thought of as pieces of a puzzle.⁴⁰

⁴⁰But not pieces capable of being put together in just one way. In that respect, the analogy here is not a perfect one. (*None* are, of course!)



2. During some sessions a creative idea will occur to someone that results in putting these various pieces together to form a complete picture. This will not occur in all sessions—perhaps not even in most sessions. But it *will* occur in some sessions—especially once participants gain some experience with the Fellowship as an institution.

3. That picture—i.e., that consensus—will be recognized by each participant as a good idea—a great idea, in fact. And because each will realize that s/he has made some contribution to that consensus, all will develop a strong commitment to that consensus.

4. That realization will produce in at least some participants a “natural high,” an altered state of consciousness. With some having such an experience, the “high” will last only briefly; with

others, it will continue for hours, even days—perhaps until the next Fellowship session. The consequences of this altered state of consciousness are discussed under points 9 - 15 below.

5. Achievement of a consensus likely will result in the development of a strong sense of solidarity, “community,” within the group. A feeling that one’s own personality has merged with the group—yet that one retains one’s distinctiveness as an individual as well.

6. Gaining a sense of Oneness with the others in the group will also result in a feeling of well-being on the part of all members of the group. That is, all will develop feelings of enthusiasm, optimism, energy, “aliveness,” a sense that one is a choice-maker in control of one’s destiny, etc. Of course, the individuals comprising the group will have different personalities, so the feelings they develop in response to the achievement of consensus will vary.

7. If the consensus reached concerns an action to be engaged in by the group as a group, the feelings of well-being and enthusiasm will ensure that the action is performed well and expeditiously.

8. The feeling of well-being engendered by the consensus achieved will contribute to the physical, emotional, and mental health of each of the participants.

9. If the achievement of a consensus by the group results in a “natural high” on the part of a given participant (it may occur to several, even all), that person’s perceptions may be altered—in that the person may begin to perceive that “there is more in Heaven and Earth than is dreamt of in your philosophy” That is, the person may begin to perceive things not just as consisting of matter, but also an intangible something that might be termed “spirit.” Some will limit this perception to other people; others will limit it to animate beings; still others will begin to perceive “spirit” even in inanimate things such as rock formations.

10. Insofar as one perceives “spirit” in something, one will develop a feeling of respect—even reverence—for that thing. One may even perceive it as holy—as has occurred with many mountains, including the Black Hills in South Dakota.

11. That attitude toward other things will have behavioral implications for the one with such a perception in that s/he will not consciously engage in hurtful behavior directed toward things that are respected. One may even engage in *positive* behaviors toward them, including worshipful behaviors.

12. The experience of an altered state of consciousness may affect one’s conception of Deity (if one has such a conception). The conventional way of conceiving Deity in our society is as a discrete, transcendent Being given the name God. But the experience of a “high” may change one’s conception of Deity—even to the extent that one no longer finds the name “God” as an

adequate name for Deity. For one may, e.g., come to conclude (Buddhist-wise) that *naming* Deity is itself blasphemous!

13. One who believes in Deity may come to see the consensus reached as being a *revelation* from Deity (i.e., John's "Helper"⁴¹). This means that one continues to perceive Deity as a discrete, transcendent Being, but now is asserting that one does not accept the theory that the Christian Bible uniquely embodies God's revelation. With the Quakers one now "recognizes" that God is *not* dead (as the Biblicists imply), is still alive, and still reveals Truths to humans. And although one continues to think of God as a discrete, transcendent Being, one may come to think that God's *only* role in today's world is reveal Truths to humans—so that, e.g., so-called "acts of God" are not such, and that the very concept of "acts of God" is blasphemous.

14. One's "natural high" may be interpreted as "indwelling"—even "possession"—by God as Holy Spirit. Which may cause one to believe that when Paul was writing about being filled with the Holy Spirit, he was referring to what some would call a "natural high" experience. Note that in this case one is thinking of God not as a discrete, transcendent Being, but as an amorphous "ghostly" something that can be present in humans. What we have here is a "God as Presence" concept of God, a God that is *experienced* rather than a God that *does*, or has done, things (e.g., create things). Given the latter, a person who has come to conceive God as Presence is unlikely to think of God as, e.g., a *creator* of things, and is therefore likely to think of the current controversy involving the teaching of evolution as sadly misguided. That those who argue for Creationism/Intelligent Design are spiritually immature individuals whose thinking about spiritual matters utterly lacks depth.⁴²

15. If one comes to perceive spirit in all (or many) things (point 9), one may (but need not) equate that spirit with Deity—so that one comes to think of Deity in terms of *immanence*. That is, one comes to think of Deity as an all-pervasive Something that "inhabits" all things. One developing such a view would not only come to have *respect* for all things, but *reverence*. And if one not merely has respect for things, but reverence, one will be even less likely to engage in harmful behavior toward them. And if one *must* kill other living things to sustain oneself, one may feel that one must perform a ceremony first, and perhaps a ceremony afterward that expresses one's thanks. Because in this case one thinks of Deity as definitely other than a discrete, transcendent Being, one may come to conclude that any attempt to personify—or even name—Deity is blasphemous.

⁴¹See, e.g., John 14:26 and 15:26.

⁴²Of relevance here is John F. Haught, *Deeper Than Darwin: The Prospect for Religion in the Age of Evolution*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003.

It is conceivable that a Fellowship participant could move into category 13, or 14, or 15. For that matter, a participant could move into categories 13 and 14, *or* 13 and 15, *or* 14 and 15—*or* even 13, 14, *and* 15. There are several possibilities here. Especially if one moves into all three categories does it become possible for one to come to believe—paradoxically—that Deity is both knowable and unknowable at the same time! This is not, note, a conclusion that one can reach in “ordinary consciousness” using common sense. It is the sort of conclusion that one can reach only if one has had certain experiences.

Despite the fact that participation in a Fellowship likely will expand one’s *concept* of God, I believe that participants will also come to *feel* close to Deity. The experience of being a participant in a Fellowship will, that is, make Deity come alive for them—rather than remaining a mere intellectual abstraction. Michael Novak once remarked that most of the people he lived among are unaware of God—and then went on to assert that the reason was that the “key experiences through which God becomes real to people are, in our society, systematically blocked”⁴³ Although I would not go so far as to claim that *only* by participating in a New Word Fellowship can one experience Deity in our society,⁴⁴ I *would* assert that such participation would be spiritually fruitful for most, if not all, participants. It is undoubtedly true that “Rarely do we find a ski lift just waiting to transport us to our mountaintop experience.”⁴⁵ A New Word Fellowship, however, is close to being a ski lift, I’m convinced!

I would even go so far as to say that participation in a Fellowship can have “salvific” implications, and not just for the various individuals participating in the Fellowship. If New Word Fellowships involve enough people in our society, this could have salvific implications for the human species—in that ideas may “come” to participants which, when acted upon, have highly significant consequences relative to humankind’s survival. This latter point is significant

⁴³“The Unawareness of God,” in *The God Experience*, edited by Joseph P. Whelan, S.J. New York: Newman Press, 1971, pp. 6, 8.

⁴⁴L. Robert Keck has introduced “meditative prayer” as an alternate “path to the Spirit.” See his *The Spirit of Synergy: God’s Power and You*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1978. Also, Matthew Fox (*op. cit.*), in his Chapter 7 (“Creation Spirituality and the Dreamtime”), refers (p. 125) to “the consciousness breakthrough that the sweat lodge is all about,” and (p. 126) hitting the wall in running. Drumming is another means to an altered state of consciousness that might be mentioned.

⁴⁵Marraine C. Kettell, “Becoming Ourselves,” a sermon delivered at Old South Church, Boston, Massachusetts, February 26, 2006, p. 4.

in that humankind's very existence is currently being threatened by "global warming," among other factors.⁴⁶

Those familiar with feminist theological/religious literature will know that that literature emphasizes experience. For example, theologian Sheila D. Collins has noted (in discussing Mary Daly) that a "group of women at a Grailville theology conference," in writing down words "which expressed for them a sense of the meaning of God in their lives," wrote such words as energizing, empowering, grounding, being, creating, etc.⁴⁷ In other words, they thought of God in *verb* terms rather than *noun* terms. Thus, my discussion here of the New Word Fellowship may resonate with women more than men (who, I believe, tend to think of Deity as a person-like being—i.e., in *noun* terms). However, it seems to me that *both* men and women have narrow concepts of God, and that participation in a New Word Fellowship would help both develop a more sophisticated (if amorphous) concept of God.

It should go without saying that participation in a Fellowship would place one squarely in the Judeo-Christian tradition. George E. Tinker has noted that the imperative *metanoite*, usually translated as "repent," is better translated as "return to God"—i.e., "recognize the divine hegemony, . . . return to the ideal relationship between Creator and the created."⁴⁸ Insofar as the key personages in the Judeo-Christian tradition have striven not only to themselves establish a close relationship with Deity, but help their fellows develop a closer relationship with Deity (and in a multi-faceted way), the New Word Fellowship is clearly in that Grand Tradition (unlike Christianity!).

Note, though, that a complex concept of "God" is associated with the New Word Fellowship (and in that respect is not unlike the Christian Bible!).⁴⁹ In some contexts (i.e., when one senses that one has received a revelation), one may conceive "God" as a discrete, transcendent Being.

⁴⁶See, e.g., Tom Flannery, *The Weather Makers: How Man is Changing the Climate and What it Means for Life on Earth*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005. On p. 183 Flannery observes that it is entirely possible that before this century is over, 60% of all species now existing will be extinct! Given this possibility, our well-being as humans will be severely affected. Indeed, there is no guarantee that we humans will not be among the 60%.

⁴⁷*A Different Heaven and Earth*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974, p. 218.

⁴⁸"Creation as Kin: An American Indian View," in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 151.

⁴⁹I should perhaps note that Jack Miles has discovered 24 different concepts of (or at least *roles* for) God in the Hebrew Bible (i.e., our "Old Testament"). See his *God: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

In other contexts (i.e., when one is experiencing a natural high), one may not so much *think* about what “God” is like, but *experience* “God” as a Presence (which one, like Paul of Tarsus, may refer to as constituting indwelling by the Holy Spirit). And in still other contexts (i.e., when one perceives Spirit in other people and/or things), one may think of “God” as an amorphous Something that is immanent (if one invokes the God-concept at all, that is). This latter God-concept is usually given the label “pantheism;” note, however, that it is given that label by those who not only conceive God as a discrete, transcendent Being, but tacitly assume that that’s the only way “God” *can* be conceived. By, that is, narrow-minded people who, because *they* think that way, find it easy to condemn those who *don’t* think their way as atheists, and treat them as if they had never heard of the “love of neighbor” command.

From the above discussion it should be clear that those who have for some time participated in a New Word Fellowship likely would not apply the label “panentheists” to themselves. For they are likely to regard this label that as a mere intellectual construct, one created by people who ostensibly would like to “think outside the box” imposed by their transcendent view of “God” but, in not having *experienced* anything that might be labeled Deity, are unable to escape their intellectual box.

APPENDIX

Group Formation

The Bishop is in charge of group formation. The chart below indicates how this would be done, depending on the number of participants on any given day. The first column indicates the number of participants present (exclusive of the Bishop), the other columns the number in each group that is formed that day. The first person chosen for a given group is the group's Prophet for the day. After all groups have been formed, the Bishop joins the last group.

No.	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
1	1				
2	2				
3	3				
4	4				
5	5				
6	6				
7	7				
8	8				
9	9				
10	10				
11	11				
12	12				
13	13				
14	14				
15	15				
16	8	8			
17	9	8			
18	9	9			

19	10	9		
20	10	10		
21	11	10		
22	11	11		
23	12	11		
24	8	8	8	
25	9	8	8	
26	9	9	8	
27	9	9	9	
28	10	9	9	
29	10	10	9	
30	10	10	10	
31	11	10	10	
32	11	11	10	
33	11	11	11	
34	12	12	12	
35	13	12	12	
36	9	9	9	9
37	10	9	9	9
38	10	10	9	9
39	10	10	10	9
40	10	10	10	10
41	11	10	10	10
42	11	11	10	10

43	11	11	11	10	
44	11	11	11	11	
45	12	11	11	11	
46	12	12	11	11	
47	12	12	12	11	
48	12	12	12	12	
49	10	10	10	10	9
50	10	10	10	10	10

Etc.